John Dewey's imagination

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ABSTRACT

In several of his writings, John Dewey returned to the importance of the imagination for thinking about experience and making sense of it. This article looks at some of what he says, especially in *Democracy and Education,* and considers the enduring importance of imagination for lesson-planning, teaching and assessment.

Keywords: John Dewey, teaching, learning, assessment, lesson-planning

John Dewey, American philosopher, educational reformer and sometime poet, signed a contract in the summer of 1911 to deliver to the publisher Macmillan a textbook on the philosophy of education. Dewey had been working towards this book all his adult life. As *Democracy and Education,* it was published five years later, in the summer of 1916, a few months before the USA, with Dewey's enthusiastic endorsement, took up arms and joined an inter-imperialist conflict unprecedented in its capacity for slaughter.

That the Great War was on Dewey's mind as he reflected profoundly on the nature, purposes and practices of education in his society may be gleaned from a number of passages across the book. In chapter 11, for example, when he introduces a sustained argument about what it means to think, Dewey notes that: 'As this is written, the world is filled with the clang of contending armies' (Dewey, 1980, p153).[1] He seizes on the continuing event of the war to illuminate his contention that thinking begins in the middle of something and is purposive. Thinking involves more than registering factual items: 'To fill our heads, like a scrapbook, with this or that item as a finished and done-for thing is not to think'. The whole point of thinking 'lies literally in what it is going to be, in how it is going to turn out'. To think about the war as news of its unfolding course arrives is 'to attempt to see what is indicated as probable or possible regarding an outcome. This is so whether the person thinking is 'an active participant in the war', or 'an onlooker in a neutral country', such as, Dewey characteristically refrains from saying, himself. 'To consider the *bearing* of the occurrence upon what may be, but is not yet, is to think'.

In *Democracy and Education,* thinking is, among other things, 'the method of an educative experience' (p170). In chapter 11 Dewey characterises thinking more fully, as:

> ...a process of inquiry, of looking into things, of investigating. Acquiring is always secondary, and instrumental to the act of *in*quiring. It is seeking, a quest for something that is not at hand... It...follows that all thinking involves a risk. (p155; original emphasis)

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And in the next chapter he says:

> Inference is always an invasion of the unknown, a leap from the known. In this sense, a thought (what a thing suggests but is not as it is presented) is creative—an incursion into the novel. (p165)

Sensitivity to 'what may be, but is not yet', consciousness of what is not at hand, and trust in 'the novel' as firm ground on the further side of the mind's leap into the unknown, all suggest a role in thinking (as Dewey conceives it) for the imagination.

Learning's accomplice

To illustrate and clarify his line of thought about thinking, Dewey imagines. He imagines the thought-processes of a war-time commander who must infer certain things on the basis of information received ('assigning meaning to the bare facts', as Dewey has it on page 156) and then must act on these inferences to develop a plan, at last discovering the soundness of his decision (in Dewey's words,' the worth of his reflections') through the consequences which follow. That these may be deadly Dewey does not spell out. He imagines only so far. He says the form – though not the content – of his imagined account of how thinking proceeds holds true not only for the commander on the battlefield but also for the far-away observer:

> [I]n the degree in which he is actively thinking, and not merely following passively the course of events, his tentative inferences will take effect in a method of procedure appropriate to his situation. He will anticipate certain future moves and will be on the alert to see whether they happen or not. (p156)

Dewey re-confirms his model by imagining, much more briefly, another circumstance and character: an astronomer who, on the basis of certain data, anticipates that there will be an eclipse and takes steps to be able to observe it.

In these sustained moments of imagination with which Dewey illustrates and vivifies his account of what thinking might be, he is careful to respect the role of knowledge. For the commander who has made his battle-plan and now awaits its outcome, 'what he already knows functions and has value in what he learns'. (p156) For the astronomer, 'given data… already attained knowledge, controls thinking and makes it fruitful'. (p157) But Dewey points out that:

> While all thinking results in knowledge, ultimately the value of knowledge is subordinate to its use in thinking. For we live not in a settled and finished world, but in one which is going on, and where our main task is prospective, and where retrospect – and all knowledge as distinct from thought is retrospect – is of value in the solidity, security and fertility it affords our dealings with the future. (p158)

Knowledge for Dewey, then, is food for thought. And it is with thinking, rather than with knowledge, that schools should be especially concerned. Dewey writes: 'all which the school can or need do for pupils, so far as their minds are concerned… is to develop their ability to think'. (p158) Such work can only proceed in company with the imagination, that power (Dewey says in a later text) which mediates between the known and the new:

> For while the roots of every experience are found in the interaction of a live creature with its environment, that experience becomes conscious, a matter of perception, only when meanings enter it that are derived from prior experiences. Imagination is the only gateway through which these meanings can find their way into a present interaction; or rather…the conscious adjustment of the new and the old *is* imagination. (Dewey, 1934, p276; original emphasis)

If 'learning' means the re-construction of the mind through its encounter with what is new, imagination is learning's accomplice.

Surplusage

Happily for teachers, imagination is everybody's power, 'as much a normal and integral part of human activity as is muscular movement'(p245). In *Democracy and Education* Dewey does not consider it systematically, as he does 'experience' or 'thinking' or 'subject-matter'. He had undertaken this work half a lifetime earlier, during the 1880s in his lectures on psychology, where he treats imagination as a stage of knowledge. Imagination, he claimed then, is the power of realising: of making real what is not present (as against the power of making the real artificial, or of making up the unreal). This way of conceiving imagination will remain seminally important. As others had before him, he distinguished between kinds of imagination, including the mechanical, which breaks down existing mental representations and re-combines them, and the creative, which proceeds toward the deliberate construction of what's wholly new, original. He endowed imagination with extraordinary potency, asserting that it gives access to:

> … the hidden meaning of things, meaning not visible to perception or memory, nor reflectively attained by the process of thinking…[Imagination affords] the direct perception of meaning… It is virtually creative. It makes its object new by setting it in a new light… (Dewey, 1975, p171)

It is through imagination that children expand their understanding of the world. The metaphor by which Dewey expresses this claim testifies to his sense of its significance. By the power of imagination:

> … the child gets released from the bondage or thralldom of sense perception and

> begins to build up a larger world…[So children are emancipated] from enslavement to the very limited world of things which can be presented to their senses. (Dewey, 2008b, pp261-2)

Not yet competent to act in many ways upon the world, the child does so in imagination, deriving thereby, Dewey claims, 'educative knowledge' of what's involved:

> Through imagination and make-believe [children] are learning to understand their world…[B]y playing… [the child] gets a certain control over the form of the process and a certain educative knowledge of the elements and factors that enter into it… This make-believe is a sort of vicarious means by which the child brings home to himself a world of experience too complicated and too difficult to come within reach of his practical, real powers. (p263)

Dewey believed that what the child imagines is just as real, to the child, as reality is in the mind of an adult. More than this: 'imagination is the medium in which the child lives. To him there is everywhere and in everything that occupies his mind and activity at all, a *surplusage* of value and significance'. (Dewey, 1990, p61; my emphasis)

The field of force which is imagination entails this 'surplusage': an over-spilling or inherent excess. Dewey had written that imagination originates in 'the expansion of a given experience through suggestion into a larger and richer whole'. (Dewey, 2008a, p197). (By 'suggestion' he means association: the availability of prior experiences.) This 'surplusage', this superfluity of 'value and significance', seems to have an inherent expansiveness which calls forth 'suggestion' or 'association', and makes the act of imaginative connection possible. The idea of 'surplusage' echoes in the claim in *Democracy and Education* that, as regards meaning-making 'the reach of imagination in realizing connections is inexhaustible'. (p215)

Surplusage implies a bursting of finitude; a 'going-beyond' which is available at every moment. A freedom. It would seem to be a quality of play conceived of as unhabituated voluntary activity, the self-willed extension of reach and competence, adventuring, pursuit of possibility. Might imagination's ready expansiveness, its always-moving-beyond, impel the mind to transcend 'suggestion' or 'association' and create, or make available to thought, the wholly novel? Conversely, might imagination also be that which conditions the mind to take up into itself and make its own whatever, until that moment, is alien or unknown in experience?

Realisation, or coming home

Imagination presents to me what is not directly before my eyes. It enlarges the scope of my individual experience beyond what I directly encounter, enabling me to plumb or prize that experience more fully and intensely. Dewey claims that the movement of

imagination also goes the other way: from wider to narrower. For imagination:

> ...is precisely the power or the instrumentality through which we translate abstract terms and symbols and formulae over into actual conditions. (Dewey, 2008b, p248)

In his example, imagination is what enables children to scope the conditions of a given arithmetical problem, and so make plain to themselves just what they are dealing with and what must be taken into account to reach a solution. Symbolically-mediated experiences, those met with through words or numbers, inevitably comprise the bulk of material on the school curriculum. Dewey notes that:

> There is always a danger that symbols will not be truly representative; danger that instead of really calling up the absent and remote in a way to make it enter present experience, the linguistic media of representation will become an end in themselves. Formal education is peculiarly exposed to this danger... (p241)

For learning to take place, symbolic material must enter the students' present experience richly. It must attain significance over and above the fact that something from it must be learned. In Dewey's terms, it must be 'realised' or 'appreciated': it must come home and be taken in. After all, as he says: 'It is one thing to have been engaged in a war, to have shared its dangers and hardships; it is another thing to hear or read about it' (p240).

Dewey glosses 'appreciation' as 'a warm and intimate taking in of the full scope of a situation' (p244), signalling an affective, even empathetic, dimension. I read this as suggesting that the act of 'mental realisation or appreciation' (p241) is not itself 'learning', but constitutes the condition within which – rather than being mechanically 'acquired' – material may be learned. That is, may be had by heart rather than by rote. Appreciation arrives through imagination, the realising power:

> Only a personal response involving imagination can possibly procure realization even of pure 'facts'. The imagination is the medium of appreciation in every field. The engagement of the imagination is the only thing that makes any activity more than mechanical... An adequate recognition of the play of imagination as the medium of realisation of every kind of thing which lies beyond the scope of direct physical response is the sole way of escape from mechanical methods in teaching... Were it not for the accompanying play of imagination, there would be no road from a direct activity to representative knowledge; for it is by imagination that symbols are translated over into direct meaning and integrated with a narrower activity so as to expand and enrich it. (pp245-6)

If this is so, it would imply that what most avails teachers who intend that their students learn (rather than just 'acquire') is not effective delivery of curricular material, or that material's sufficient remembering and rehearsing, but its appreciation in Dewey's

sense. Without this appreciation, this 'realisation', the material will not get across and come home to the student. If students are to learn, the teacher must afford due scope for 'the accompanying play of imagination', or at least must avoid preventing such play from taking place. The play's the thing which makes the learning possible.

Planning, teaching, assessment and imagination

Before a lesson can be learned, it must be planned, which is to say, imagined. A lesson-plan deals in what may be but is not yet: an irreality, a space of possibilities. It stakes out a suitably de-limited future in which a sequence of undertakings related to certain content is proposed. Dewey's advice may serve to turn attention not only towards the choice and sequencing of undertakings and content, but towards ways in which the play of imagination of all those involved might inform that sequence and accompany it as it unfolds itself. The plan's adequacy, and hence – to an extent – the lesson's success, depends in part on the teacher's conscious concern with how the lesson will 'come home' to pupils or students as a direct experience, and hence how any mediated experiences, component elements within the whole, may be realised. Anticipating this in imagination and making use of whatever this imaginative act supplies to inform or resource the lesson-plan, can enable the work of lesson-planning itself to escape becoming mechanical, habitual, unrealised in Dewey's sense.

Once planned, the lesson must be taught, and here, too, a teacher's imagination must suffuse the work moment by moment. Until it is over, the lesson remains in the making: a pedagogical possibility whose direction and content are available for alteration in response to what the teacher's imagination proposes or seizes on (of itself or prompted by students) as more enabling or fruitful. For to teach a lesson is simultaneously to evaluate the lesson as it is taught and attempt to gauge how it is being 'realised' by the students. This requires a teacher to assess where individuals seem to be in the process of their learning even as it takes place. To arrive at this understanding, the teacher must imagine, so far as may be possible, what it is like to be the student experiencing, in the lesson's particular context, the challenge of learning. Such an alignment is designed (in part) to uncover or acknowledge where the difficulty may be for any one student, or for many, in order to put into action means which will overcome it. The choice of means, too, may be informed by imagination as the teacher tries to decide what is most likely to be in tune with what the pupil or student needs then and there. Assessment of this kind, *in media res* and independent of any activity of testing, is essential to the act of teaching. It is entirely context-bound and hence unique in its particulars. Relational and dynamic, reason alone won't suffice to accomplish it, and cannot fully pre-empt it.

Dewey writes more than once about a child of three who, grasping the similarities of shape and motion, called the looped and swinging chain of a fob-watch a hammock.

This, says Dewey, is not error but metaphor: the dawn of imagination in the child. A kind of teaching, metaphor's portal can open an unsuspected way of conceiving (in language) the world and experience. A metaphor is imagination's whole work in miniature, an act of potentially original meaning making which declares an expanded understanding. In making this available, metaphor shocks conceptual thought, unsettling categories with the sudden insight of a pertinence within impertinence, and so requiring of conceptual thought that it think more, think further.[2] If metaphor is, at root, the presentation of one thing in terms of something else, our entry into the symbolic realm of language is imagination's pre-dawning. The stuff of the world and our being in it (insofar as we understand this) the 'something else' of language renders. Then to learn language might be seen as an expression of the vital inherent excess which characterises imagination, learning's ally and like learning implicit with an emancipatory torque, immeasurable and incommensurable as individuality, whose stamp it is.

Notes

1. All quotations in the article are from Dewey (1980) unless otherwise stated. In this paragraph, all quotations are from page 153 of that work, and any emphasis original. For ease of reading across the remainder of the text, a quotation cited only by a page reference will be from this text.

2. These ideas are Paul Ricoeur's. See Ricoeur (1991), p125 and Ricoeur (2003), p358.

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